

A Fine Balance

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When I was eleven years old my father gave me my first novel: “A Fine Balance,” by Rohinton Mistry. The book weaves together a glorious constellation of colors, odors and social classes to depict the bustling culture of the Indian subcontinent. Over six hundred pages Mistry tells the inevitably tragic tale of Dina, Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck: four people from four very different versions of India colliding in the politically turbulent period of the 1975 “Emergency.” Their stories co-exist almost in complete contradiction: a middle class widow alongside two “untouchable,” sewing apprentices and a young, university-going nephew arriving from the mountainous region of Nepal; each desperately trying to balance both the growing chaos of an awakening urban India with that brewing inside themselves. In moments, they manage to attain balance, a delicate dance of spices, tea leaves, things unsaid amongst piercingly bright fabrics; poverty, sweat, joy, cows and dust that encompass, just about suffocating, ones experience of this ancient culture that pumps through my veins.

Yet, wherever I travel in the world, it is not this fine dance of elements that anyone sees, but instead the large almond eyes of a traditional Indian woman. They are physically gigantic and jet black to the beat of my long, unruly hair that no matter how I try to avoid, still looks best in matching, double braids slick with coconut oil. The story goes that when I arrived two months early, my mother assumed I had some sort of according facial malformation, as my eyes inhabited nearly half my face. Needless to say, no one in my family is a physician and indeed, I would like to believe I grew into them. Even so, they are impossible to hide.

Last week, I walked into a coffee shop in a small neighborhood of Athens in a bright blue polka-dotted sundress still to be greeted most emphatically with, “Namaste!” Almost universally, yellow taxi cab drivers across the globe double-take to their rearview mirror when I climb in. Leeringly, and with little doubt, asking “India, am I right? Big eyes!! ” Of course, the obliging Indian daughter in me smiles, feeling the need to provide them the validation they seek. To throw up confetti of unknown origins, and channel my inner Price-is-Right voice to inform them that indeed, they have chosen the right price.

I don’t want to sound bitter. I know in the most distilled form they are seeking to make a connection with another sentient being, something shiny in the otherwise mundane day-to-day. However, what exactly should I feel when I am not at all inside, what I appear so strongly to be on the outside?

Little do they know, I float quite aimlessly between my identities and as I got older, even my trips back to Dodavaram began to feel less comforting and more painful. My cousins smirked as I explained things in Telugu, teasing me for the words my mouth now stumbled on, struggling to form something that was no longer there. Strangers awaiting their fried goods at the mirch bajji stand began to stare when I picked up my precious

packages of oil-soaked newspapers. They say it is your American posture that gives you away.

Truly, it is not as if I have not tried to fit the part. In high school and college, I joined the usual liberal arts Bollywood dance performances, adding to my own performance that I had ever been familiar with this subculture before. The truth is prior to moving to the United States, I had never heard of Bollywood, let alone been able to sing along with the lyrics of its' most famous hits. Frankly, I spent much of my childhood between the backwoods of Perth, Australia smelling eucalyptus leaves and eating dirt. At my most advanced stage of play, I peeled leaves off coconut trees in my grandmother's village of Dodavaram. Perhaps, the Owl sent to inform me of Bollywood's predominance in Indian-American culture was diverted by the fried mirch bajjis at the village center, something I can much more readily empathize with.

I spent quite a bit of my time trying to be the identity the world so effortlessly placed on me: the ideal Indian woman. For some time, I even fooled myself believing if I could just find the perfect group of Indian girlfriends, we could take enough group photos that eventually no one could suspect I loved the Red Hot Chili Peppers more than Sharukh Khan, the heart throb of Bollywood subculture.

By the time I came to medical school, I had grown tired of my own diaspora blues. As Ijeoma Umebinyuo wrote, "Too foreign for home, too foreign for here, never enough for both." I defiantly began to claim all my identities in all spaces, despite the looks of momentary surprise or disappointment that inevitably covered peoples faces. I began to see the unique beauty of my own fine balance. However, even here, the scale occasionally tips.

Recently, as I sat down to watch one of my favorite shows on origin stories of famous chefs, I was thrilled to see an episode dedicated to Asma Khan. She is an Indian lawyer turned chef who ultimately opened a home-style Indian restaurant in London with an empowering, all-female kitchen. One scene shows Asma walking alongside her grandfather amidst their mango orchard, joking about eating mangoes whole and so ripe that the juice dripped carelessly down their chins. The memory seared me; transporting me for a moment back to late summer evenings on my grandmother's veranda. Leaning over the edge so as not to attract ants to the carnage, sticky juice bursting from the corners of my mouth and through the spaces between my fingers.

Tears began to stream down my face. A friend watching alongside me gaped, open-mouthed and confused at my reaction. I, too, felt confused; longing for a place or a person that no longer felt like mine. Years had passed since I had last thought of these memories. I could not remember the last time I actually wanted to go back to visit India. Yet, my heart ached as if a fresh lover had just been ripped from my arms. Who exactly was I longing for?

In these moments, I see that although I cannot quote *Khabi Kushi Khabi Gham* or necessarily demonstrate the latest hip gyrations dominating the Bollywood stages, the

very nature of India has found a way to inhabit me. Like Dina and Ishvar, I have haphazardly had to create my own delicate, contradictory dance of survival that reflects, in many ways, what it means to live and breathe in India. Perhaps, even then, my father knew this. The chaos of identities that lives within me ebbs and flows, with moments of perfection almost immediately lost to tears incited by a Netflix special. These giant orbs residing quite permanently on my face no longer seem so fraudulent, absorbing the swirling clouds of deep red dust raised up from caked, pre-monsoon roads each time a stray calf strolls across it. All of it settling quietly into my memories until it is jostled once again from its delicate slumber by an unexpected, ripened mango that has once again tipped the scale.